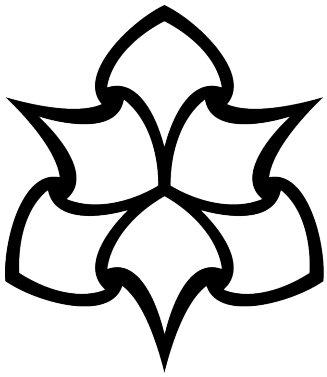

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‘Maybe I can do this. Maybe I should be here’: Evaluating an academic literacy resilience and confidence programme

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‘Maybe I can do this then. Maybe I should be here’: Evaluating an academic literacy, resilience and confidence programme

It has been well documented in research that students from so-called ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds can experience significant difficulty in accessing Higher Education, in part due to a lack of cultural capital. This is further reinforced by ‘invisible pedagogic practices’ (Tapp 2015), which uphold the prestige of disciplines such as ‘critical analysis’, ‘structure’ and ‘argument’ without adequately inducting students into such practices. Through the evaluation of an academic literacy intervention (‘ARC’) designed to improve the academic resilience and confidence of students on an undergraduate degree programme, this paper demonstrates that ‘literacy’ is as much a social practice as it is a set of applied skills. Thus, ‘academic literacy’ should constitute both study skills and academic socialisation. This paper further argues that the acquisition of ‘academic literacy’ necessitates the adoption of an ‘academic identity’; which is an emotional, as well as an intellectual endeavour. This requires institutions to move away from the deficit model of ‘academic literacy support’ towards models which enable the construction of a shared academic identity and cultivate a sense of belonging to the university environment.

Keywords: academic literacy; identity; widening participation; higher education; belonging

Introduction

As the diversity of the student body in Higher Education (HE) has increased, the work of academics such as Reay (2003; Reay, David, and Ball 2005) have suggested that students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds can experience significant difficulty in accessing the institutional culture. As such, it has been suggested that institutions could, and should be doing more to meet the diverse needs of this population. Although there is general agreement that institutional culture can be a barrier to accessing HE, there are also those that question the ethics of inducting the student into such a culture whilst the, often exclusive, practices of institutions remain largely unchallenged (Hallett 2013). As such, the question of what constitutes effective practice in the inclusion of a diverse student

population, and indeed, what this looks like in practice, remains open-ended. This could be largely due to the broad range of barriers that students experience when accessing the curriculum, which can be located both inside (Harris et al. 2016; Penketh and Goddard 2008) and outside of the institution (Lea and Street 1998; Pym and Kapp 2013).

The context for this study is a post-1992 institution based in the North of England, which has benefited significantly from the impact of widening participation, with 27% of its students coming from 'low participation neighbourhoods' (HESA 2016b) and approximately 39% of its student population being classified as 'mature' (What Uni 2017). As non-continuation rates of mature students are almost twice the figure than that of young students nationally (HESA 2016a) there is a case to develop strategies to improve the experience of 'non-traditional' learners.

The 'ARC' Programme was conceived in response to the needs of a diverse student cohort, where 27% of the students had come from non-traditional entry routes such as 'FastTrack[1]' or access courses (UniStats 2017), and a significant number had been diagnosed with Dyslexia either prior to, or shortly after enrolment onto the programme. It further aimed to respond to research which suggests that mental health problems in the undergraduate student population are on the rise (Kerr 2013) with a significant proportion of those reporting issues attributing this to workload.

The 'ARC' Programme

[1] 'FastTrack' is a 7-week intensive access to higher education course combining academic skills and subject specific knowledge. The course is aimed at those who do not hold necessary qualifications to access HE.

'ARC' is an academic literacy intervention that is delivered alongside one BA (Hons) degree programme in the Faculty of Education. The course is a HEFCE-funded programme aimed at students who wish to pursue pathways into teaching or the wider children's workforce: students who enrol on the programme are predominantly female[2]. The intervention aims to develop the Achievement, Resilience and Confidence ('ARC') of students on the degree programme by delivering a suite of sessions which address the principle skills of academic writing, reading, constructing an argument, as well as addressing common barriers to achievement such as stress.

The sessions typically last for one hour and take place during lunch periods between lectures. They are advertised to first and second-year students on the programme, and delivered by a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) based in the department. One of the central values that underpins the 'ARC' sessions is the voluntary nature of participation. As such, attendance is unrestricted and students can drop in to the sessions that meet their individual needs. Further, as they are embedded into the academic timetable, the sessions can be accessed easily which allows students to incorporate them into their routine. The 'ARC' programme aimed to move away from the deficit model associated with targeted learning support intervention (Hallett 2013), and towards a model of learning which encouraged students to take ownership, and become autonomous in their learning habits: thus, improving their resilience and confidence as they progressed through their degree.

The first section of this paper will provide an overview of the literature with regards to what is commonly called 'academic literacy', as well as the impact of low

[2] At the time of writing, there are currently 122 students enrolled on the programme, of which 15 are male.

academic literacy skills upon levels of stress amongst undergraduate students at university. The following section will outline key findings in relation to a focus group that was conducted to evaluate the 'ARC' programme, and discuss motivational factors associated with engagement, as well as those of improved resilience and confidence. Finally, these findings will then be concluded and offer suggestions for future research and practice in this area.

Academic Literacy

Research studies into academic literacy in HE have been critical of universities for positioning the issue of learning support as a problem which is exclusively located within the student (Shields 2015; Tapp 2015; Hallett 2013). They argue that the imposition of elite values upon students can be perceived as a threatening; serving to further distance them from the discipline to which they are trying to gain access. Pym and Kapp (2013: 273) note that 'the consequence is encouraging passivity and dependence, stripping students of their agency'. What they refer to as an 'assimilationist' approach to student diversity can result in a devaluation of the identity which the student brings to the programme of study, and undermines the autonomous learning behaviours often positively associated with good academic practice (Fazey and Fazey 2001b; Harris et al. 2016). Tapp (2015: 716) argues that this could lead students to be motivated purely to fulfil criteria 'rather than to think for themselves in the construction of meaning'.

Roberts (1996: 161) asserts that 'learning how, why, when and where to ask questions is an indispensable part of university education', which supports Lea and Street's (1998) argument that 'literacy' is as much a social practice as it is a set of applied skills. Thus, 'academic literacy' should constitute both study skills and academic socialisation; encompassing the cultural and social dimensions of academic life. Others have further acknowledged that academic life is an inherently emotional endeavour

(Hughes and Smail 2015; Pym and Kapp 2013), and as such cultivating a 'sense of belonging' within a programme of study is essential if students are to be successful in academic study (Pennington et al. 2018).

Institutional understanding of what is or is not good academic practice can also be limited. Research by Lea and Street (1998: 162) found that when lecturers were questioned directly about what they perceived to be a successful piece of writing, 'there was less certainty when it came to describing what underlay a well-argued or well-structured piece of work'. As such, it is insufficient to expect students to meet the expectations of practices such as 'critical analysis', 'argument' and 'structure' without giving meaning to such practices initially (Tapp 2015; Shields 2015).

Undergraduate workload and stress

Those who believe themselves to have poor levels of academic literacy are at significant risk of suffering from stress-related mental health problems. 'Getting it wrong' is intimately linked to the 'fear of never getting it right' (Shields 2015: 620), and as such negative feedback can have a damaging effect on students' self-esteem. It has been argued that institutions do not often dwell sufficiently on the impact of 'self-theories' students have with regards to their perception of their academic competence (Tapp 2015; Xuereb 2015). This is particularly important as there are studies which suggest that there are a significant proportion of students whose perception of their competence is quite low (Xuereb 2013; Shields 2015; Fazey and Fazey 2001), even if they are performing well (Dickinson and Dickinson, 2014). This is supported by research which suggests that up to 50% of students consider dropping out of university at some point in their programme (Xuereb 2013; Kerr 2013); yet not many of these students seek the support that they need (Harris et al. 2015).

Whilst stress is a realistic experience for university students, this can easily lead to *distress* (Xuereb, 2013). Levels of distress depend on the amount of resilience, or coping mechanisms that the student has (Dickinson and Dickinson 2015; Fazey and Fazey 2001a; Shields 2015; Harris et al. 2016). This feeling of stress is compounded if the student holds the perception that they do not have the ability to achieve their potential (Xuereb, 2013). Therefore, anxiety is induced in circumstances where a task is perceived as important and is combined with low perceived competence about the ability to carry out the task (Fazey and Fazey 2001). This would suggest that students who are facing barriers either within the institution, or outside the institution may face a significant risk of developing stress-related problems if they doubt their ability. This supports Hallett's (2013) suggestion that offering learning support for 'study skills' which is decontextualized may be counterproductive to those students who already feel overwhelmed and incapable of achieving, as it reinforces the idea that they are in deficit.

In order to reconceptualise academic literacy, there has to be an acceptance that 'academic and psychological issues are intertwined' (Pym and Kapp 2013: 278) as students tend to be more emotion-focused than problem-focused (Xuereb 2013). Research has suggested that positive coping behaviours can mitigate against the effects of stress, such as planning and seeking social support for instrumental and emotional reasons (Xuereb 2013). As such, it is important that when teaching 'academic literacy', departments in universities move away from a deficit model. Instead, Tapp (2015: 712) asserts that 'students who experience difficulties… are not deficient, but rather are as yet unfamiliar with "how to do things here"'. Adopting an approach which embraces the diversity of a 'community of learners' (Tapp 2015), where the emotional toll of learning

can be acknowledged and is coping-focussed, is more productive than reinforcing a negative academic self-concept (Hughes and Smail 2014; Harris et al. 2015).

The aim of this piece of research was to evaluate the efficacy of the 'ARC' sessions to this end, as well as to examine what factors were associated with the development of resilience and confidence. The research further aimed to ascertain what the motivational factors were associated with attendance at the sessions, with a view to identify ways of increasing participation rates amongst students in the cohort.

Methods

Qualitative Methodology

The research applied a focus group methodology as part of an evaluation of the ARC programme. The overall goal was to build upon an existing intervention to improve practice. As such, the research did not start with a fixed hypothesis, and was designed to respond to emerging data (Timmons and Duckworth 2012).

Research Aims

The aim was to develop a comprehensive understanding of what motivating factors were associated with attendance at 'ARC' sessions, as well as the perceived benefits of attendance, with the goal of improving the offer to students. As such, the questions which guided the design of the study were as follows:

- What are the factors associated with attendance at ARC sessions?
- What relationship, if any, is there between attendance at 'ARC' sessions and improved resilience, confidence?

- Does improved academic literacy have any impact upon levels of workload related stress?

Participants and Data Collection

The focus group comprised a total of five participants; all of whom were at the end of their first year of study on the same undergraduate degree programme. The aim was to draw upon as naturalistic a sample as possible (Silverman 2013) by working with a group that reflected the 'typical' makeup of an 'ARC' session. The sessions are generally attended by three to six students from the aforementioned degree programme. Attendees at the sessions were mostly female and mature students who come on a voluntary drop-in basis according to their perceived needs. As such, three of the participants had attended 'ARC' sessions regularly; all of whom were mature students (Harriet, Linda and Julie). The other two students (Eve and Olivia) had attended relatively few sessions, and Olivia was classified as a 'traditional' or 'young' student (under the age of 21). All ARC sessions were taught by the same tutor (first author) and the focus group was facilitated by a researcher who had no personal relationship with the students (second author). All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

The focus group lasted for 45 minutes in total and consisted of initial rapport building questions to understand students' motivation to embark upon a university programme. The main body of the interview schedule adopted a semi structured style, allowing the discussion to be directed through group interaction. The focus group was structured around set topics which were introduced by the focus group facilitator. Topics centred the discussion around 'ARC' sessions and other resources available at the university: (1) general university experience so far (2) social experiences (3) decision to attend ARC sessions (4) confidence at university, and (5) sources of support

Analysis

The audio recording of the focus group was transcribed verbatim by the second author in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. Said researcher had no relationship with the participants, degree programme or 'ARC' sessions. The research project applied two analytical frameworks to the data to capture a depth of understanding from descriptive and interpretative perspectives. Thematic and narrative analyses were initially conducted separately by the researchers, and then shared and agreed through further joint discussion.

Thematic analysis

A thematic analysis was carried out according to procedures identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis, in this instance, is a data-led analytical method, identifying patterns or 'themes' emerging from the data. An explicit, semantic level of analysis was conducted to identify meaning in the data. The analysis captured the 'surface meaning' of the data, and therefore avoided interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initial coding of the focus group transcripts addressed the pre-determined research questions. Further sub-codes were identified and refined to develop descriptive themes.

Narrative analysis

The second type of analysis applied to the data was Dialogical Narrative Analysis (DNA) (Frank 2012). This was applied to each participant in the data set individually, to understand how previous experiences had influenced their pathways into HE. This was used to ascertain what impact these experiences had upon how they positioned themselves within the academic environment, and what the impact was of this upon both their engagement with the 'ARC' sessions, and their emerging academic identity.

Findings

Thematic analysis themes

The focus group data was analysed holistically as a full data set, as opposed to independently for each participant. The analysis aimed to capture the group discussion, thus recording consensus beliefs and experiences within the group. Further, it became apparent that three of the participants regularly attended 'ARC' sessions as a social group. This was therefore noted during analysis. Three overarching themes emerged through analysis: *academic progression*, *confidence growth*, and *support*.

Academic progression

There were many incidents throughout the focus group where participants discussed their pre-conceptions of HE, and how these ideas shaped their perceptions of their ability to attend university. Further discussion of academic self-concept highlighted their enhanced academic engagement with scholarly activities.

Linda commented upon her own academic progression in light of her previous assumptions of university entry requirements:

> before I knew like I would come to university then I just thought oh, you've got to be really intelligent to go and stuff … I'm quite surprised I'm doing this like it's not overly hard (Linda).

Interestingly, Linda did not identify her progression to HE as a result of being 'intelligent enough' to attend university, but rather expresses her experience of university as being 'not overly hard'. Olivia also agreed with Linda's comments illustrating similar beliefs and experiences.

> I was like no it's for clever people and like I'm not clever enough to go to uni and I'm never gonna go … so yea it's improved my confidence cause I know that I can do it now (Olivia).

The focus group further discussed skills they had developed in specific 'ARC' sessions. Those who regularly attended identified specific development in academic writing and critical analysis. They further conversed on how these skills have impacted other parts of their life, 'I use that on a few family members as well' (Linda)

Discussion around academic progression during the focus group was consistently approached in this type of positive manner, whereby students believed that they had developed academically throughout their first year at university. Their academic development was mostly attributed to the 'ARC' sessions, but also appeared to be driven by their status a university student; in other words, being 'clever' or 'intelligent' enough to access HE.

Confidence growth

A further factor seemingly contributing to academic progression was confidence growth. This was a key topic discussed throughout the focus group by all participants, which was evident both in response to attending university and 'ARC' sessions. In many cases, self-confidence was enhanced through academic achievement, as students experienced receiving high grades, thus perceiving themselves as developing literacies to succeed in HE

> my marks were better than what I thought I was going to get so that kind of helped me to think "oh maybe I can do this then, maybe I should be here" (Julie).

When discussing confidence more generally group members regularly interacted in agreement with each other's experiences.

> I'm not sayin it's easy but y'know I'm not struggling like I thought I might [Harriet: not yet [laughs]]. Yea, it's just second year. (Linda)
>
> year one proves you can kinda do it (Eve)

The discussion of confidence illustrated a sense of pride with students and alludes to social and group facilitation for confidence building. This appeared more pertinent in the three participants who appeared to attend ARC sessions as a social group.

> when we're referencing sometimes in class and someone will say "how'd ya do this?" And we're like "we know" (Linda)

Linda eludes to the group's ability opposed to solely her own, highlighting the importance of the social group in enhancing confidence on the degree programme. This may act as a support mechanism in some instances.

Support

Support was a key topic discussed throughout the entirety of the focus group. Participants did not consistently agree on the supportive quality of all 'ARC' sessions, and further differences were voiced regarding social support.

Social support. The support within the aforementioned social group was not explicitly discussed. However, conversations about 'ARC' sessions were often approached using 'we', rather than 'I'. Furthermore, it was clear that their friendship was linked to enjoyment at university. 'I really enjoy it. We've got good friends and stuff haven't we?' (Linda).

As mature students, Linda, Julie and Harriet stated that they did not socialise at university like 'students normally do' (Linda), whereas Olivia highlighted both the help and hindrance of socialising upon academic work when living on campus. Specifically, Olivia states 'I've recently distanced myself from them', when she discussed peers in her accommodation who are not enrolled onto the same course. She suggested that the social aspect of campus living hinders her academic work as 'they just want to go out and not bothered about doing uni'. However, Olivia differentiates between peers she cohabits

with and those who are on her degree programme, suggesting that she finds some support from those on her course.

In sum, there appeared to be benefits and drawbacks to social relationships for academic development, which seems to be marked by age and campus living. In the mature student cohort, friendship served to promote collective learning and enjoyment of 'university life'. However, for Olivia, who resides on campus, peers served as a distraction to her academic commitments. Olivia further supports this by communicating her plans to move off campus for the next academic year which she feels will aid in her commitment to university and attendance at ARC sessions.

Academic support. The university in general was largely considered to be a supportive environment within the focus group. Students communicated awareness of their own abilities and struggles, and were secure in the knowledge that support was available should they need it.

> I don't think there is anything I struggle with that I haven't found there is somewhere on campus which will support me. (Linda).

Benefits associated with 'ARC' sessions were mostly communicated by those who attended regularly: Linda, Julie and Harriet, as opposed to non-regular attendees. Largely, 'ARC' sessions were discussed positively, providing resources which continued to be utilised outside of the sessions.

> I always find when I'm doing essays I have to go, right do you want me to analyse it? And then I have to tell myself what I'm analysing. So she ['ARC' tutor] did that and that's, that was good (Julie).

> I still go back to that, when I'm analysing I have that sheet with me just to break it down (Linda).

Those who regularly attended felt that 'ARC' sessions supported them with ongoing academic work. However, the regular attendees were divided on the effectiveness of the support provided on the 'stress management' 'ARC' session. Two of the three attendees conveyed positive attitudes towards this element of the programme

> So you take your worry away from it because when it's wrote down it doesn't seem that big because sometimes you overthink things don't ya? (Harriet).
>
> that helped me a lot (Linda).

However, Julie discussed the practicalities of adopting the stress management support to her lifestyle as a parent.

> How can you take it away? Oh, starve me kids! So that did nothing for me whatsoever (Julie)

Therefore, although regular attendees generally described 'ARC' sessions as being supportive, the relevance of these sessions appeared dependent upon their individual needs. As such, the voluntary nature of these sessions seemed appropriate to allow for these differences.

Finally, interaction between all members of the focus group was heightened in discussion around assessment schedule. Largely, students believed that the organisation and timing of assessments did not support their academic development or confidence: 'they put assignments too close together' (Julie). Regarding academic development, members of the focus group felt that the timing of assessments hindered academic progression due to a lack of feedback throughout the year.

> it would be better if you got them in intervals cause then feedback you get back for negative you could fix [Julie: you're building on them yea]. Yea now we're sending three things at the exact same time whatever negative I've got. They're gonna be on all three (Linda).

The lack of feedback throughout the year had an impact upon their self-confidence, and therefore hindered their ongoing progression throughout the year. Throughout the focus groups Julie highlighted the impact of these deadlines on her levels of stress.

> I am now in panic mode thinking uh oh. Uh oh all these again and what have we done last time and what if I can't do it again (Julie).

Overall, students in the focus group generally found the university and 'ARC' sessions to be supportive yet appreciated individual differences in the efficacy of the sessions. However, the organisation and timing of assessments was communicated as a hindrance to progression and self-confidence by all members of the focus group. Participants suggested that ongoing feedback from assessments throughout the year would be more conducive to their academic resilience and confidence.

Narrative themes

In the second phase of analysis, the focus group data were first analysed for each individual participants' story and positioning, and then compared across participants to see how their individual responses influenced the group's construction of narrative. The analysis was then collated into the following themes: *academic identity*, *autonomy and ownership* and *the emotional labour of learning.*

Academic identity

Throughout the interview, participants jointly constructed narratives about what it means to be a 'student'. However, to be a *'student'* was not necessarily linked to the development of an 'academic' identity, which led participants to draw distinctions between what could be considered a 'student' identity or an 'academic' identity. There seemed to be a link between attendance at 'ARC' sessions and motivations towards one identity or the other, which appeared to be a source of conflict for some participants.

Student identity (the 'typical' student). Participants drew upon popular cultural narratives to construct their understanding of what it means to be the average student. The 'typical' student was one who has no other responsibilities outside of their university commitments, while 'other' students had significantly more to deal with and have no time to 'socialise like students normally do' (Linda).

> the ones in my accommodation they just want to go out and not bothered about doing uni (Olivia)

While none of the participants identified themselves as being a 'typical' student, Olivia was cast into this role by others because she was young and lived on campus. Olivia resisted being cast into this role by other participants, yet acknowledged her struggle to distance herself from this stereotype, and the lifestyle associated with it. She felt a conflict in her identity, which led her to feel that she should have done more to engage with the 'ARC' sessions and build her academic skills, attributing the solution to this problem as leaving the campus entirely to focus on academic studies.

> I wish I had gone to more [ARC sessions]. I think because I live on campus now I think I'd probably go to more next year when I don't 'cause I'll be moving back home and I kinda, I'll have to be here (Olivia)

Academic identity (the 'non-traditional' student). The 'non-traditional' student was one who is motivated to learn, and to capitalise on opportunities given to them to enhance their skills. Although these students may experience external conflicts of identity, they did not have an interest in engaging in extra-curricular activities that might be associated with being a typical 'student'. As such, if the 'student' identity is more closely affiliated with socialising, then an 'academic' identity is someone who adopts the cultural language

and practices of learning in HE. To these students, attendance at 'ARC' sessions is logical, as it boosts their capacity to learn.

Socialisation into the academic environment. The social dimension of learning is a significant part of academic development. Collective identity is constructed through the shared experience of attending 'ARC' sessions, which supports their socialisation into academic life. Shared experiences allow them to face the challenge of adopting a new 'academic' identity more easily. This quells their anxieties, and the 'ARC' sessions create space in which they can tease apart the stressors and make sense of them with support from a 'knowledgeable other' (ie, the 'ARC' tutor). In this way, they begin to conceptualise their understanding of academic skills.

> well it's different when you're reading something isn't it. Such and such is telling me that carrots are good for ya. Now we're learning to say but why? Why are they good? So it forces that upon you really (Julie)

For example, here Julie drew upon a familiar, everyday saying about the benefits of eating carrots and successfully articulated her developing critical thinking skills in a way that is not at odds with her other roles as 'worker' and 'mother'. This allowed her to feel more comfortable with her emerging academic identity. The shared meaning-making amongst the students allowed them to grow in confidence but also to develop their academic voice, and the cultural capital of being a university student.

> I didn't think I'd be able to write academically. I'm using words now I wouldn't normally have used… I've come more now to have an academic conversation with someone 'cause I can understand a lot more (Linda)

Autonomy and ownership.

The voluntary nature of the sessions also allowed the students to take ownership of their learning, whilst guiding them through the skills and attributes required to achieve at an academic level. The fact that attendance was not compulsory allowed them to choose which session to go to, at the right point for them.

> The ball's in our court, so if there's something we don't feel confident on we can have a refresher (Harriet)

This gave them control over their learning, whilst also addressing the anxieties they had over aspects of academic work that they struggled with; especially when they were between feedback periods.

Students who attend the ARC sessions also seemed to have a clearer idea of why they came to university, and the emotional and deliberate investment in their education had spurred them to take control of their learning. On the other hand, Olivia described her decision to come to university as heavily influenced by others; her school and her mother. Therefore, motivation to attend was driven by the decisions of others and the threat of a 'dead end job' without a university education.

The emotional labour of learning

The emotional investment that participants have made in their learning, both positive and negative, provide an indication as to what is at stake for students entering HE. Success in a degree has emotional, intellectual and economic consequences, which are felt implicitly and cause the students to engage with their academic work emotionally.

Emotionality was a key feature of all of the participant narratives, indicating that learning is as much an emotional endeavour as an intellectual one. For all participants, but the mature students in particular, stress was an implicit feature of their narratives. At some point in the focus group, all participants felt that they were not sure they had the

requisite skills to be at university; positioning university as for 'clever people', and therefore not for them. However, there were highs as well as lows in emotional experience, which were linked to successes and failures in developing their academic identities.

The process of adopting an unfamiliar identity caused them to feel isolated at times as their understanding of who they were changed. Although they were adapting well to the university environment, their emerging academic identities were still fragile.

> one of my assignments when I got one in the 50s I was devastated… that one in the 50s really knocked my confidence (Harriet)

> I am now in that panic mode thinking uh oh. Uh oh, all these again and what if I can't do it again. You know so I think, I think self-doubt from me is big now… (Julie)

The need that they express for regular feedback and reassurance reflects the fragility of their sense of belonging to the environment. The 'wobbles' that they experience are symptomatic of the doubt they have over their ability to achieve.

However, their investment in each other as friends going through something together is a strong source of support for them. This is evident in the repeated use of the word 'we' when they talk about why they choose to come to 'ARC' sessions, and how they are beneficial to their learning. 'ARC' sessions create a space in which they can express their concerns and discuss these together.

As well as sharing their worries, the 'ARC' sessions also gave them opportunities to share their successes and enjoy the fruits of their investments in extra support.

> Well if I reference now I feel confident referencing. I always go back and check it but I surprise myself… (Harriet)

And when we're referencing in class and someone will say how'd ya do this? And we're like 'we know' (Linda) [all laugh]

This symbolises the sense of confidence and belonging which they share as they construct their academic identities together. The emotions linked to assessment feedback were far from neutral, and fluctuate between significant highs and lows. This suggests that creating space for students to go through their 'wobbles' is important.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact that attendance at voluntary academic literacy support sessions ('ARC') had upon the resilience and confidence of those that attended. The study further aimed to explore student motivational factors associated with attendance and non-attendance at these sessions, and the impact of stress on academic development. Our analysis found six overarching themes from both the descriptive and narrative inquiries. The descriptive inquiry found attendance at ARC sessions were conducive to the students' perceived *academic progression, confidence growth* and *support.* Our narrative analysis further revealed how the process of developing confidence in this context was coupled with the adoption of a new *academic identity*, which was socially constructed amongst students who attended. This further permitted them a sense of *autonomy and ownership* over their learning, which contributed to their increased confidence. The data further suggests that there was *an emotional labour of learning*, which was inherent to all participants as they alluded to the emotional attachment they had to their work. This also appeared to be linked to the perception they had of who they were *before* university and who they were becoming *at* university. Attendance at 'ARC' sessions not only gave the students space in which they could develop the tools needed to think and study on an academic level, but also to navigate this new territory together, and jointly construct their understanding of their place in the university environment.

Emerging academic identities: attendance and efficacy of the ARC programme

Our qualitative inquiry identified factors associated with both attendance at, and the efficacy of sessions aimed to enhance academic achievement, resilience and confidence. The efficacy of 'ARC' sessions in developing specific literacy skills to enhance academic progression was a key motivator to attend the programme. This supports a critical pedagogic approach, in that the sessions appeared to develop skills crucial to success in HE such as asking 'why', alongside learning 'how' (Roberts 1996). Moreover, the development of such skills in targeted voluntary sessions allowed students to understand the standards expected of them at undergraduate level. Shields (2015) argues the importance of clearly communicating such expectations, which is in line with research which suggests that students are unaware of expectations as emotions often override corrective feedback (Yorke 2003).

Further, the voluntary nature of the 'ARC' sessions is central to the development of autonomous learning behaviours, as participants took ownership of their learning through their decision to attend the 'ARC' sessions. This demonstrates how moving away from a deficit model of student support can contribute to confidence growth, as students independently choose which sessions to go to at a point which is right for them. The capacity to attend sessions according to individual needs is important for developing academic literacy, as it addresses the diversity of student learning and allows students to construct an academic identity at their own pace. However, It is important to note that other factors including assessment timing and feedback were found to influence the student's academic self-confidence and session attendance in the current study. More specifically, assessment timing was perceived to be 'all at once' and as such feedback could not be reviewed prior to the next assignment. Students believed this to hinder their

ability in determining which ARC sessions would be beneficial to them. Indeed, feedback is an important tool in influencing student learning and achievement, though the direction of such influence (positive or negative) may be determined by both the content and timing of feedback (Hattie and Timperley 2007). As such, it is necessary to be mindful of such influencing factors when evaluating both efficacy and attendance at sessions.

Many of the key benefits of attending the 'ARC' sessions were overwhelmingly social, in terms of the levels of confidence achieved through supportive relationships from both peers and academic staff. However, this social support was directly linked to an emergent 'academic identity' which fed into a perceived increase in achievement on their undergraduate programme. This 'academic identity' which they construct is conceived of a motivation to learn and a drive to capitalise upon opportunities to enhance skills and achieve to the best of their ability. The findings posit that these identities are constructed and developed through social interaction. The impact of a socially constructed academic identity supports the notion that both academic progression and socialisation are important in academic literacy (Lea and Street 1998). Therefore, the academic identity which is constructed in the process of attending 'ARC' sessions leads to improved resilience and confidence at university.

In contrast, the findings also seemed to suggest that there are elements of university life which mitigate against the cultivation of an academic identity. Whereas motivation to attend the 'ARC' sessions seemed to be determined by a deliberate investment in study, non-attendance seemed to be associated with a drive to adopt a different kind of identity. A contributing factor identified with non-attendance at 'ARC' sessions was related to the stereotype of a 'typical student', whereby students are less motivated academically, and rather prioritise socialisation. The findings further suggest this is influenced by living on campus, as students feel more pressure to engage in

activities which are likely to have a negative impact upon their academic work. However, this appeared to be driven by a similar need for social belonging, and the importance of social bonds as an important factor in confidence growth. This is consistent with research conducted by Maunder (2017) who found that healthy adjustment to university was strongly associated with how well students attached to their friendship group. Building on this notion, findings from the current study suggest the social influence upon academic success may be dependent on the nature of the social group itself (for example, whether the social group is motivated towards a 'typical student' identity or an 'academic' identity as discussed earlier). Therefore, the current study also found that motivational factors associated with attendance at 'ARC' sessions were tied up in both individual, and socially constructed academic identities.

The emotional labour learning: social support for undergraduate stress

The quality of social relationships and support appeared as a key predictor in how students managed the emotions involved in undertaking an undergraduate degree. More specifically, supportive social relationships seemed to mitigate against the impact of the levels of stress that were implicitly woven into the narratives of the student participants. Similarly, the link between social relationships and mental health has also been identified in quantitative survey-based research (Talwar 2016) which suggests that those with (perceived) low social support experience higher levels of depression. As such, understanding and encouraging social support amongst university students would likely be beneficial to student learning, and the emotional toil it encompasses.

For the mature students especially, the emotional impact of developing an academic identity was challenging. For the participants in this study, their identity before entering university was bound up by their age and their previous experiences before

coming to university. The transition into HE, therefore, caused them to experience a conflict of identity as they tried to accommodate their new role as a university student. This is supported by other research which suggests that mature students can often struggle to find a sense of belonging in the HE environment (Johnson and Watson 2004; Mallman and Lee 2016), which to some extent, relates to their perceived 'right' to be at university (Fergy et al. 2008). The stress communicated by the mature students in the current study appeared to be a result of a conflict in responsibilities (student, worker, mother), but also capacity to achieve; at times due to a perceived lack of intelligence, perceived lack of time to do everything; or both. Previous research has suggested that these challenges are accentuated in the mature student population, who often begin academia with a number of pre-existing identities, experiences and responsibilities (Diane Reay, Ball, and David 2002; Johnson and Watson 2004). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the stress associated with juggling multiple responsibilities alongside academic study may be particularly pronounced for women due to pre-existing gendered expectations (Stone and O'Shea 2013). Many mature female students begin their academic journey with conflicting objectives: to develop an independent (academic) identity devolved from their relationships while also embracing the importance of such relations (Gouthro 2005). Therefore, the struggle to accommodate new and multiple identities exemplifies the social and emotional labour involved in academic progression and belonging. This offers some contextualised understanding of the experiences described by our current sample who are exclusively female. However, it may also be important to consider that this conflict may also be experienced amongst male students, given similar situational and familial circumstances.

Attendance at 'ARC' sessions allowed the students to construct a shared identity in which they could cultivate a space to support each other in navigating university life.

The findings of this study seem to suggest that support to develop academic literacies can soften the impact of stress and thus enhances academic development. This also seems to be somewhat linked to the social identities developed as a result of attendance at 'ARC' sessions. The current study therefore provides some support for the notion that education is an emotional and social endeavour (Pym and Kapp 2013; Hughes and Smail 2015) and as such, it is important for programmes to offer space to acknowledge this as students make sense of these new experiences. The positive impact of friendship on social and emotional adjustment in the first year of university (Ramsay et al. 2007) further supports the benefit of providing such an environment. In this regard, the current study suggests the 'ARC' programme is to some extent effective in enhancing academic resilience and confidence by providing a voluntary social space for peer discussion and support, thus developing a shared academic identity.

To this end, our findings highlight the importance of considering academic, social and emotional influences in the development of resilience and confidence in academic literacy. Findings support a recent study suggesting both perceived academic ability (self-efficacy), and social and emotional factors (social identity) to predict student satisfaction in Psychology students (Pennington et al. 2018). Indeed, for all participants in the current study, the scale of the emotional investment that students put into their time at university; economically, intellectually and emotionally is apparent. The emotional labour of learning seems to be a contributing factor to the development of academic literacies. As there is so much at stake, it is important to create room to accommodate the 'wobbles' that people experience throughout their time at university, and in carving out a position for themselves in a new and unfamiliar environment. 'ARC' sessions created space in which students can develop the language and practices of academia with peers, which resulted in a shared sense of belonging. This sense of belonging also allows them to turn

their anxieties around belonging to the university into successes which they can celebrate together.

Limitations

It is necessary to note potential limitations in the current study, which should be considered for future research of this kind. Firstly, exploration of only one focus group of first year students limits our understanding of the efficacy of the 'ARC' programme in second year students and does not allow for investigation of academic literacy development from first to second year. Furthermore, the makeup of the focus group included only one young, 'typical' student with the remaining four accessing university through 'FastTrack'. The lack of male participants also prevents us from giving a more generalised understanding of the academic literacy practices of the broader student population. As such, the lack of diversity within the group may therefore present an unbalanced view of student experiences. However, it is important to note that the make-up of the focus group was representative of the 'ARC' sessions, and the gender balance of the degree programme in general given that the student cohort was predominantly female. The lack of male attendance also appears to be reflective of other research which suggests that male students are less likely to ask for help with their studies (Kleinfeld 2009; Swanson, Vaughan, and Wilkinson 2017). Therefore, although this group was not diverse, it does offer an accurate reflection of 'ARC' session attendance.

In mind of these limitations, future research would benefit from exploring academic resilience and confidence development across years one and two to gain a wider understanding of academic literacy across the course of a degree. Finally, it is important to ensure in future research that the experiences and beliefs from a variety of student

'types' across multiple programmes are considered; particularly in relation to young students and male students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study findings suggest that the development of academic literacy extends beyond the skills required to produce academic work. In line with the initial aims of this study, the findings suggest that attendance at 'ARC' sessions can contribute to the positive construction of a new 'academic' identity, and the voluntary nature of these sessions gives students the confidence to take control of their learning; supporting the notion that attendance is positively associated with resilience and confidence. Further, the study found that motivation to attend 'ARC' sessions is influenced by the social environment and the way in which students perceive themselves in relation to others. In addition, emotional attachment and response to academic success and failure is likely to influence academic self-concept. Therefore, the findings also support the notion that socialisation into the academic environment can mitigate against work-related stress. However, it is important to recognise the fragility of this emerging academic identity, and as such professionals in the HE sector should be mindful of the emotional investment that students can invest in their academic work.

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